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OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME POLICY COMMENTARY # 6

PARTICIPATION DURING OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

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IN THIS COMMENTARY

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- *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #2: High School After -School: What Is It? What Might It Be? Why Is It Important?*
- *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #3: Reflections on System Building: Lessons from the After-School Movement*
- *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #4: After-School for All? Exploring Access and Equity in After-School Programs*
- *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #5: Inside the Black Box: Exploring the "Content" of After-School*

Nine out of ten voters believe children and youth need some organized activity or place to go every day after school, and more than half say there are not enough after-school programs available for children and teens.[1] Real demand for an expanded public response to the need for children and youth to have more structured time, more time with adults, and more skill development opportunities is upon us. This demand has fueled a movement whose aim is to create more and better programs for children and youth to participate in. Finding effective ways to respond to this challenge, particularly in tight economic times, is not easy.

Increasingly, requests for additional funding for out-of-school time opportunities are being countered with requests not only for evidence that programs work but for more detailed information on participants and participation rates. But when we talk about "participation," what do we really mean? As a field, we face a great many unanswered questions. Does every young person need to participate in a structured program five days a week? Is it good to participate in the same program every day? Which children and youth need access to programs the most? How much is enough?

Whether the desired outcome of participation is improved school performance, improved social skills or decreased anti-social behaviors, it stands to reason that after-school programs are best positioned to make a difference in young people's lives if they deliver maximum supports to those most in need. Other things being equal, quality programs that deliver well-designed activities to regularly attending students who would otherwise be alone, idle or likely to get into trouble should have a greater impact than programs of lesser quality, with less frequent attendance and/or less vulnerable participants.

Questions Currently Outstrip Answers. Most programs track participation, but do so in very basic ways that do not lend themselves to rich analysis. Researcher Sandi Simpkins Chaput of Harvard Family Research Project states, "Among the several hundred studies I've looked at that address participation in out-of-school programs, probably 70 percent only use the single indicator of 'yes' versus 'no.'" She calls for greater attention to three important aspects of participation — intensity, or the amount of time youth participate in a program during a given period; duration, which addresses the history of participation over time; and breadth, capturing the variety and range of activities in which young people participate.

Simpkins Chaput provides a more thorough treatment of these three dimensions of participation and many of the questions addressed in this commentary in a summary being released by Harvard this spring.[2] And many forthcoming studies are taking a closer look at participation (see *Research in the Pipeline*). However, the limited information currently available about what happens in programs and outside of them means that accountability requirements related to participation or attendance must be developed cautiously, in ways that do not inadvertently do harm.

Perspectives on Participation. This commentary examines the issue of participation from two perspectives. We begin broadly and with a youth-centered lens, by asking how children and youth spend their discretionary time and how time use patterns relate to outcomes. After painting a picture of the full out-of-school time landscape, we look specifically at structured program participation and provide at least partial answers to some basic questions: Who participates? How much? Why or why not? To close, we draw on the information collected to reflect on policy issues related to participation.

Why the two perspectives? Because we believe that the answers to important policy questions like "How much is enough?" or "Who needs what?" should be answered in the context of the real lives of the children, youth and families combined with an honest assessment of what programs can offer.

Despite a continued emphasis in the public discourse on safety, after-school programs are increasingly recognized as capable of offering much more than supervision. Research is catching up with common sense to demonstrate that structured programs can be extremely rich contexts for positive development,[3] and a host of program evaluations suggest that participation in structured programs can lead to increased engagement in learning, social skills development, and a range of other positive outcomes.[4]

Clearly such programs can and do have a positive impact. And at the most basic level, participation is important because children and youth can not benefit from programming if they don't show up. But regardless of whether they are in a formal program or not, children and youth are "participating" in something all the time. If we consider time use during the out-of-school hours from a youth-centered perspective, what can we learn?

What Do Children and Youth Do Outside of School?

> *The importance of community environments and institutions in contributing to the development of young adolescents is well supported by both research and practice. The opportunity to make that contribution arises largely during the nonschool hours.*[5]
>
> — Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development

When considering the general time use patterns of children and youth, school emerges pretty quickly as a key institution. And while they do spend a significant amount of time there, school accounts for roughly just 30 percent of the waking hours of most children and youth in the U.S. The comparatively short school day experienced by young people here means that they are left with a significant amount of discretionary time.[6] How much time, exactly, is difficult to say, given rough data and conceptual differences in how time use is categorized in the few studies that do exist. But Larson and Verma's 1999 effort to pull together an array of research on 9- to14-year-olds across cultures does provide a useful snapshot of early adolescence in the United States.[7,8]

How much time? The amount of time young people spend outside of work and school varies significantly across populations. According to this definition — outside of work and school — roughly half of young people's waking hours in the U.S. are discretionary. Adding into the mix personal maintenance activities such as eating and household chores brings that number down slightly, still leaving about 40 percent of young people's waking hours in the U.S. for leisure. European adolescents seem to have about the same or slightly less leisure time, while Asian young people appear to have a quarter to a third of their time for leisure.

Doing what? Children and youth spend this leisure time primarily engaged in a combination of free play and television viewing. American, European and Asian young people all appear to spend about two hours in front of the television each day, with boys watching more TV than girls. The bulk of remaining leisure time is spent in free play, which for American and European youth includes a fair amount of idle time. All regions spend less than an hour reading, with children and youth in this country reading less than Europeans, and Europeans less than Asians.

The time that children spend in free play appears to be supplanted during adolescence by labor in nonindustrial populations and by socializing (often more than two hours a day) in Europe and the United States. Engagement in active, structured leisure — sports, programs, the arts, etc. — is greater in the United States and Europe than in Asia. Across regions, participation in structured leisure is higher for those from higher socio-economic backgrounds, decreases with age, and, in the case of sports, is more common among boys than girls.

With whom? American and European young people spend roughly a quarter of their waking hours with peers, as opposed to in nonindustrial societies, where young people spend most of their time at home. Who young people spend time with changes over the developmental trajectory for some populations. In the United States, white youth spend a decreasing amount of time with families beginning in early adolescence, while time with family remains constant for African Americans.[9]

While generalizations and cross-cultural comparisons are difficult to make, the differences that do emerge given an international lens and the few observations we can make about age and ethnicity differences within the United States certainly beg the question of variation across communities. Richer portraits of young people's lives that describe what they are doing, where they are doing it and with whom they are engaged, could help encourage more developmentally and contextually appropriate programmatic and policy responses (see *A Week in the Life: A Snapshot of One Student's Discretionary Time*).

Does Time Use Matter?

It stands to reason that how young people spend this significant block of discretionary time could make a difference developmentally. Some of the research summarized above has looked at the relationship between time use and subsequent outcomes such as behavior and achievement.

A Week in the Life: A Snapshot of One Student's Discretionary Time

The story that follows describes a week in the life of Delonte, a fictional teen, through a youth-centered lens. It paints an integrated picture of his participation in a range of activities during out-of-school time, activities that vary in terms of level of structure, content, setting and who is involved. Our goal here is to look at participation from a young person's perspective by analyzing it against a framework that lays out the full range of activities, settings and people that make up the landscape of a young person's discretionary time.

At first glance, Delonte, 13, is a quiet kid. But once you get beyond his shy demeanor, he displays a mature sense of humor and a curiosity about his environment. A year ago, his mother moved him and his two siblings to a small Midwestern city so they would be in a safer neighborhood and she could get more support from her family. His seventh grade year is going pretty well; he likes his teachers well enough and has made a few friends at school.

He likes geography and science the best, since those classes involve a lot of hands-on projects. Six months ago, his science teacher connected him with a model rocket building program at the YMCA that meets Monday and Wednesday afternoons for an hour and a half. After those sessions, Delonte stays at the YMCA for a few more hours, sometimes joining pick-up basketball games or hanging by the foosball or pool tables. Sometimes he gets a ride home from YMCA staff, otherwise he knows to start heading home, six blocks away, before dark.

Delonte's granddad is a preacher. On Fridays, he takes Delonte to his storefront church and pays him $12 for the two hours it takes to vacuum, clean the bathrooms, and straighten the hymnals. On Saturdays, Delonte also participates in the church's youth group comprised of eleven kids aged 12 to 17. Youth group is fun; they go on field trips, play games, talk about issues they face in their lives and occasionally volunteer in the neighborhood.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he goes directly to his grandma's house where his two little sisters and two cousins close to his age also go after school. Grandma usually makes a snack and then lets them watch TV for an hour before making sure they complete their homework. After homework, if it's warm, he and his cousins go outside, either to the park or right on the block. Lately, his cousins have been teaching him some new soccer moves. Delonte's mom arrives at about 6:30 P.M. and they all eat dinner together before going home. Mom usually checks their homework before doing some housework. Delonte has a little less than an hour before she reminds him to start getting ready for bed. He usually spends some time watching TV or reading comics before he turns in.

Activities	Settings				
	In School	**Structured Out-of-School Time Programs**	**At Home**	**Unstructured Public Spaces (Streets, Malls, Friends)**	**Structured Public Spaces (Museums, Libraries)**
Skill Development	Classes in school, hands-on activities	Model rocket classes at the YMCA		Cousins teach him soccer	
Homework			Time at grandma's/ checked at home		
Reading for Pleasure			Comics		
Paid Work					Cleaning the church for $12
Volunteering/ Service		Church youth group			
Interests/ Hobbies		Model rocket classes at the YMCA	Reads comics		Pick-up basketball, foosball, pool at YMCA
Religious Worship		Church youth group			Attends church with family
Chores					
Socializing		Church youth group	Family meals at grandma's	Hangs out with cousins/plays soccer	
Personal Care/Eating			Meals at grandma's/ sleeping at home		
Watching Television			An hour at grandma's/ an hour at home		

Research in the Pipeline

- Researchers at the **National Center for Children and Families at Columbia University's Teachers College** have begun work on a meta-analysis of four separate literatures on youths' out-of-school activities and time use. Looking at the conceptually-related, but largely non-integrated literatures on participation in extracurricular activities, structured after-school programs, youth development programs and leisure time studies, Jodie Roth and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn are conducting an integrative review of these knowledge bases, to be followed by empirical analyses that shift and advance the research focus of the field beyond the question of *if* participation in certain after-school activities is beneficial to *why* it is. For more information, contact Jodie Roth at jr328@columbia.edu.
- Researchers at the **University of Illinois** are in the final year of a statewide representative survey of 11th graders' participation in organized after-school programs and activities. The study looks at both rates of participation and the types of developmental experiences youth encounter in diverse organized activities. The results will show how frequently adolescents have experiences related to identity development, learning initiative, forming social capital, and other developmental domains across communities and across types of school- and community-based activities. For more information, contact Reed Larson at larsonr@uiuc.edu.
- Researchers at the **University of Minnesota's Center for 4-H Youth Development** are in the analysis phase of a study on middle and high school youths' decision making related to discretionary time use and their real and perceived out-of-school time options. The team is looking at the common and divergent experiences of young people in urban, suburban and rural communities - examining characteristics of these communities that shape how out-of-school time alternatives are perceived and which activities yield the highest rates of participation. The researchers are also zeroing in to look at increasing drop-out rates as youth, especially boys, get older. For more information, contact Mary Marczak at marcz001@umn.edu.
- Researchers at **Penn State University, the University of Arizona and UC - Davis** have developed an online survey as part of a national study of why young people participate in certain programs, why they left programs they no longer attend, and what they think they are learning while in programs. The team is specifically interested in examining participation among African-American, Latino, Arab-American and Chaldean-American youth. Two papers summarizing related findings from an initial round of research have been completed and submitted for publication. For more information, contact Daniel Perkins at dfp102@psu.edu.

And while causation can not be demonstrated from these data, findings suggest, not surprisingly, that discretionary time use indeed matters.

First and foremost, active forms of leisure support development more so than passive ones. Children who spend time reading for pleasure, for example, do better on cognitive measures, while time spent watching television and studying do not appear to correlate positively with achievement.[10]

Second, setting appears to be important. Participation in active forms of leisure within structured settings is linked with positive cognitive and emotional outcomes. Reginald Clark has demonstrated that reading, writing, enrichment activities, hobbies and sports result in higher literacy skills when they occur in "high-yield" settings — settings where students show enthusiasm, focus, take on leadership roles, and engage in developmentally appropriate problem solving.[11]

Third, within structured settings, type of activity also matters. For example, while involvement in faith-based and volunteer activities links to positive educational outcomes and low rates of risky behaviors, participation in team sports is mixed, correlating with both positive educational trajectories and high rates of alcohol use.[12] Activities that place a high degree of emphasis on youth leadership appear to facilitate the development of initiative, teamwork and self-directed growth, while more adult-driven experiences may better facilitate the development of specific skills or talents.[13]

While there is no doubt that homes, parks and other places where children and youth spend discretionary time have the potential to be stimulating environments, there is no guarantee that they will be. In fact, we know that millions of young people grow up in communities that offer little in the way of positive, stimulating options.[14]

It is clear that how and where young people spend their leisure time correlates with developmental outcomes in important ways. Structured after-school programs play a crucial role in ensuring that these important decisions are not left to chance. In the sections that follow, we focus on participation in structured after-school programs and highlight relevant information from specific program evaluations (see *Selected Findings about Participation from Out-of-School Time Program Evaluations*).

Who Participates in Structured Programs after School?

While the information is spotty, from a policy perspective, some trends are important to note in terms of who participates.

Many after-school programs are reaching low-income and minority children and youth:

- Sixty-six percent of schools operating 21st CCLC programs in 2001 were high-poverty, meaning that more than half their students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.[15]
- At TASC after-school sites, 88 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunches and 81 percent were African American or Hispanic.[16]

However, programs may not necessarily be reaching those children and youth who need them the most:

- The typical participant in federally-funded 21st CCLC programs would not have otherwise been at

home alone, suggesting that some programs may not necessarily be reaching children most in need of supervision.[17]

- Aside from the issue of alternative care arrangements, many programs struggle to reach those children and youth who by other standards (socio-economic status, school success) may be most in need of, and most likely to benefit from, involvement.[18]

Older youth may be a particularly underserved audience:

- Participation appears to decline with age despite the fact that older youth continue to express an interest in after-school programming.[19] Public/Private Ventures' study of three communities found that while two-thirds of 13- to 15-year-olds reported participation in out-of-school activities, only half of 15- to 17-year-olds participated.[20]
- Programs with a focus on civic activism may be particularly powerful for reaching those older and more vulnerable youth who are often not reached by conventional programs.[21]

How Much Do They Participate and How Much Does It Matter?

When you simply measure participation using "yes/no," you gloss over many important details. Some researchers who measured duration found that outcomes were not significantly different unless youth participated for one or two years.

— Sandi Simpkins Chaput

Whether or not young people participate in programs is important, but being able to track how much, how often, for how long and in what range of activities, is critical. With the pressure on to demonstrate impact, this level of information is of increasing interest to program providers and policy makers alike.

- **Intensity,** sometimes referred to as dosage and/or frequency, varies a great deal across programs. While attendance at 21st CCLC drop-in programs appeared low and sporadic, averaging 1 to 2 days per week, programs sponsored by organizations such as The After-School Corporation (TASC) and Building

Selected Findings about Participation from Out-of-School Time Program Evaluations

These evaluations reflect varying research designs and levels of rigor. We highlight them here because they represent major initiatives serving large numbers of children and youth, and have made some effort to capture information about participation and/or the relationship between participation and impact.

21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC): Conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and released in January 2003, this evaluation focused on a sample of elementary and middle school centers. Available online at www.ed.gov/pubs/21cent/firstyear.

- Overall participation rates in 21st CCLC were .9 days per week for middle school students and 1.9 days per week for elementary school children.
- Participants were more likely than non-participants to have lower grades, watch more television, and come from families with lower incomes and lower parental educational attainment.
- The typical participant in 21st CCLC programs would not have otherwise been home alone, suggesting that programs were not necessarily reaching "latchkey" children.
- While participation did not appear to impact participants' reading scores, increases in school attendance and decreases in tardiness were reported.
- The program had a statistically significant positive impact on parental participation in school-related activities.

The After-School Corporation (TASC): Conducted by Policy Studies Associates, this evaluation focused on 96 after-school centers in New York City over four years. Available online at www.policystudies.com/studies/youth/TASC%20Year%203%20Implementation%20Report.pdf.

- TASC projects averaged 3.9 and 2.9 days of participation per week for elementary and middle school students respectively.
- The evaluation measured impact on "active participants" — those participating at least 60 days over the school year and at least 60% of the time they were enrolled in the school linked to the program.
- Participation over time (duration) had some impact on math achievement. TASC projects reported positive impacts on math performance after two and three years of participation (no impact on reading or math in the first year).
- Increases in participants' school attendance and school engagement were also reported.

Extended-Service Schools Initiative (ESS): Conducted by Public/Private Ventures and MDRC, this evaluation focused on implementation, looking at participation and costs in ten after-school centers in six cities. Available online at www.mdrc.org/publications/48/abstract.html.

- Average participation rates were 1.2 and 2.4 days per week for middle and elementary school students respectively.
- Participation was defined as attendance in at least one session during a school year.
- The ESS evaluation found that the "hardest to reach" youth were generally *not* being served by the program.
- There was a positive impact on participating students' self-reports of paying attention in class.

LA's BEST: Conducted by the Center for the Study of Evaluation at UCLA, this evaluation looked at program implementation and impact at six LA's BEST sites.

- In the absence of the LA's BEST program, 34% of participating children and 23% of their parents indicated that their after-school arrangements would not include "adequate adult supervision."
- Both children and parents experienced the after-school program as significantly safer than their neighborhoods.
- Vietnamese- and Cantonese-speaking parents, however, while rating after-school programs safer than the neighborhood, rated both as not very safe and preferred to keep children closer to home.
- Teachers reported positive achievements among LA's BEST students as a group compared to non-LA's BEST students. Overall grades were found to be significantly higher after program participation.

Education Leaders for Life (BELL) have achieved much higher average attendance rates.

- **Duration** varies and appears to matter. For example, while first-year participants in LA's BEST programs reported a range of benefits, improvements in grades in math, science, social studies, reading and writing appeared after two years of participation.[22] Similarly, in the case of TASC, the program did not appear to have an impact on math achievement after one year, but did after two and three years of participation.[23]
- **Breadth** or variety appears to be important. Rosenthall and Vandell[24] found that fewer program activities were associated with negative staff/child interactions. In a rare attempt to look at breadth of participation, Baker and Witt found that the number and range of different activities youth participated in during two after-school recreation programs mattered — those who experienced three or more activities had better outcomes than those who only participated in one or two.[25]

One might conclude from the above information that short-term programs are not worth funding. But the relationship between duration and intensity may be critical. Can a short-term but highly intensive experience still have an impact? Positive evaluations of summer programs such as BELL[26] and the High/Scope Institute for IDEAS are reason to be optimistic.[27]

Why Do They or Don't They Participate?

…the short answer to the question of participation was simply, 'it's fun'…another notable feature to emerge…was the value youth place on the learning that takes place in youth programs.

— Annalise Carleton-Hug, et al.

Young people participate in after-school programs for a host of reasons, including friendship, fun, skill development and safety. Reasons vary by individual and tend to shift developmentally.

- Children and youth mention being with friends and having fun as common reasons for participation; they also place a premium on learning, skill building, safety and support for future goals, especially as they get older.[28]
- Participation is complicated by many factors. Older youth may take on additional household responsibilities, seek employment, or find other options more attractive. It is critical that decision makers not mistake lower teen participation rates for lack of interest. More than two-thirds of teens nationally say they would be likely to participate in programs after school were they available, and that interest remains fairly consistent from 9th through 12th grade.[29]
- Parental values influence participation. Cultural values, norms and experiences may also come into play. Immigrant and first generation youth may face more parental restrictions limiting their involvement in out-of-school time programs. Possible reasons include language barriers, cultural expectations, immigration status, and lack of familiarity with programs.[30]

Participation from a Policy Perspective

When it comes to public support, after-school programs are on the road but not out of the woods. Questions about participation rates and participation alternatives may well increase calls for accountability requirements at the state or local levels. Obviously, every effort made to transform hours of isolation, boredom or danger into hours of engagement, connections and creativity has multiple payoffs for the child, the family, the school and the community. After-school program availability alone, however, can not guarantee this kind of transformation.

Develop requirements and guidelines with caution. What youth are doing, where they are doing it and with whom they are engaged are critical questions that, when integrated with a focus on participation in specific structured programs, can yield rich portraits of young people's lives. Attendance requirements that may inadvertently pull young people out of informal settings where learning and engagement are happening to pass time in formal programs that in theory could offer little more than supervised care do not necessarily lead to improved outcomes. And, while targeting children most in need of supervision makes sense, it is important to remember that "non-latchkey" children and youth, for whom immediate safety may not be a concern, also benefit from spending time in stimulating, structured environments after school.

Consider value added when defining impact. Looking at program participation in light of how children and youth spend their discretionary time in general allows for a slightly more sophisticated way of thinking about the value of structured programs. What we expect programs to be able to deliver depends to some degree on what it is we believe they are replacing and the characteristics of the contexts in which they occur.

If the alternative to program participation is doing nothing in an unsupervised environment, then a minimal outcome such as basic supervision may be enough to demonstrate value. If the alternate activity is watching tel-

evision and hanging out with friends, then some increase in structured leisure and productive activity may be enough to demonstrate value. But if the alternative to program participation is some other creative activity, structured or unstructured — that ups the ante for what a "worthwhile" program would need to provide. If the alternative is being at home with family, the important question is, at home doing what?

Programs are critical developmental contexts. Clearly children grow up in communities, not in programs. But public schools were created a century ago out of a sense that every child needed a critical set of knowledge, skills, and values and that therefore efforts should be made to set expectations, provide trained adults, facilities and materials and ensure access.

We are on the verge of defining a new institution — after-school. This comes in response to demand for an expanded public response to the need for children and youth to have more structured time, more time with adults and more skill development. The demand stems from a sense that while it is still possible for some families to cobble together a healthy "diet" of informal activities and relationships for children and teens, economic realities have made that increasingly difficult.

The bottom line is that programs — intentional combinations of specific people in specific places offering specific possibilities — are clearly needed. But it is important that they come in many forms, meet the needs of a range of participants and are designed to deliver maximum supports to those most in need.

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